Alfred Adler theory - Lecture notes

Introduction to Applied Psychology (K.R. Mangalam University)

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Alfred Adler

Alfred Adler fashioned an image of human nature that did not depict people as victimized by instincts and conflict and doomed by biological forces and childhood experiences. He called his approach individual psychology because it focused on the uniqueness of each person and denied the universality of biological motives and goals ascribed to us by Sigmund Freud.

In Adler's opinion, each individual is primarily a social being. Our personalities are shaped by our unique social environments and interactions, not by our efforts to satisfy biological needs. Although sex was of primary importance to Freud as a determining factor in personality, Adler minimized the role of sex in his system. To Adler, the conscious, not the unconscious, was at the core of personality. Rather than being driven by forces we cannot see and control, we are actively involved in creating ourselves and directing our future.

Inferiority Feelings

Adler believed that inferiority feelings are always present as a motivating force in behavior. "To be a human being means to feel oneself inferior," Adler wrote. Because this condition is common to all of us, then, it is not a sign of weakness or abnormality.

Adler proposed that inferiority feelings are the source of all human striving. Individual growth results from compensation, from our attempts to overcome our real or imagined inferiorities. Throughout our lives, we are driven by the need to overcome this sense of inferiority and to strive for increasingly higher levels of development.

The process begins in infancy. Infants are small and helpless and are totally dependent on adults. Adler believed that the infant is aware of his or her parents' greater power and strength and of the hopelessness of trying to resist or challenge that power. As a result, the infant develops feelings of inferiority relative to the larger, stronger people around him or her.

Although this initial experience of inferiority applies to everyone in infancy, it is not genetically determined. Rather, it is a function of the environment, which is the same for all infants—an environment of helplessness and dependency on adults. Thus, inferiority feelings are inescapable, but more important, they are necessary because they provide the motivation to strive and grow.

The Inferiority Complex

Suppose a child does not grow and develop. What happens when the child is unable to compensate for his or her feelings of inferiority? An inability to overcome inferiority feelings intensifies them, leading to the development of an inferiority complex. People with an inferiority complex have a poor opinion of themselves and feel helpless and unable to cope with the demands of life. Adler found such a complex in the childhood of many adults who came to him for treatment.

An inferiority complex can arise from three sources in childhood: organic inferiority, spoiling, and neglect. The investigation of organic inferiority, Adler's first major research effort, was carried out while he was still associated with Freud, who approved of the notion. Adler concluded that defective parts or organs of the body shape personality through the person's efforts to compensate for the defect or weakness, just as Adler had compensated for

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rickets, the physical inferiority of his childhood years. For instance, a child who is physically weak might focus on that weakness and work to develop superior athletic abilty.

Spoiling or pampering a child can also bring about an inferiority complex. Spoiled children are the center of attention in the home. Their every need or whim is satisfied, and little is denied them. Under the circumstances, these children naturally develop the idea that they are the most important persons in any situation and that other people should always defer to them. The first experience at school, where these children are no longer the focus of attention, comes as a shock for which they are unprepared. Spoiled children have little social feeling and are impatient with others. They have never learned to wait for what they want, nor have they learned to overcome difficulties or adjust to others' needs. When confronted with obstacles to gratification, spoiled children come to believe that they must have some personal deficiency that is thwarting them; hence, an inferiority complex develops.

It is easy to understand how neglected, unwanted, and rejected children can develop an inferiority complex. Their infancy and childhood are characterized by a lack of love and security because their parents are indifferent or hostile. As a result, these children develop feelings of worthlessness, or even anger, and view others with distrust.

The Superiority Complex

A condition that develops when a person overcompensates for normal inferiority feelings is called a superiority complex. This involves an exaggerated opinion of one's abilities and accomplishments. Such a person may feel inwardly self-satisfied and superior and show no need to demonstrate his or her superiority with accomplishments. Or the person may feel such a need and work to become extremely successful. In both cases, persons with a superiority complex are given to boasting, vanity, self-centeredness, and a tendency to denigrate others

Striving for Superiority

Adler described his notion of striving for superiority as the fundamental fact of life (Adler, 1930). Superiority is the ultimate goal toward which we strive. He did not mean superiority in the usual sense of the word, nor did the concept relate to the superiority complex. Striving for superiority is not an attempt to be better than everyone else, nor is it an arrogant or domineering tendency or an inflated opinion of our abilities and accomplishments. What Adler meant was a drive for perfection. The word perfection is derived from a Latin word meaning to complete or to finish. Thus, Adler suggested that we strive for superiority in an effort to perfect ourselves, to make ourselves complete or whole.

This innate goal, the drive toward wholeness or completion, is oriented toward the future. Whereas Freud proposed that human behavior is determined by the past (that is, by the instincts and by our childhood experiences), Adler saw human motivation in terms of expectations for the future. He argued that instincts and primal impulses were insufficient as explanatory principles. Only the ultimate goal of superiority or perfection could explain personality and behavior.

Fictional Finalism

The idea that there is an imagined or potential goal that guides our behavior. Adler applied the term finalism to the idea that we have an ultimate goal, a final state of being, and a need

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to move toward it. The goals for which we strive, however, are potentialities, not actualities. In other words, we strive for ideals that exist in us subjectively. Adler believed that our goals are fictional or imagined ideals that cannot be tested against reality. We live our lives around ideals such as the belief that all people are created equal or that all people are basically good. Adler's life goal was to conquer death; his way of striving for that goal was to become a physician (Hoffman, 1994).

These beliefs influence the ways we perceive and interact with other people. For example, if we believe that behaving a certain way will bring us rewards in a heaven or an afterlife, we will try to act according to that belief. Belief in the existence of an afterlife is not based on objective reality, but it is real to the person who holds that view.

Adler formalized this concept as fictional finalism, the notion that fictional ideas guide our behavior as we strive toward a complete or whole state of being. We direct the course of our lives by many such fictions, but the most pervasive one is the ideal of perfection. He suggested that the best formulation of this ideal developed by human beings so far is the concept of God.

There are two additional points about striving for superiority. First, it increases rather than reduces tension. Unlike Freud, Adler did not believe that our sole motivation was to reduce tension. Striving for perfection requires great expenditures of energy and effort, a condition quite different from equilibrium or a tension-free state.

Second, the striving for superiority is manifested both by the individual and by society. Most of us are social beings. We strive for superiority or perfection not only as individuals but also as members of a group. We try to achieve the perfection of our culture. In Adler's view, individuals and society are interrelated and interdependent. People must function constructively with others for the good of all.

Thus, to Adler, human beings perpetually strive for the fictional, ideal goal of perfection. How in our daily lives do we try to attain this goal? Adler answered this question with his concept of the style of life.

The Style of Life

The ultimate goal for each of us is superiority or perfection, but we try to attain that goal through many different behavior patterns. Each of us expresses the striving differently. We develop a unique pattern of characteristics, behaviors, and habits, which Adler called a distinctive character, or style of life.

To understand how the style of life develops, we return to the concepts of inferiority feelings and compensation. Infants are afflicted with inferiority feelings that motivate them to compensate for helplessness and dependency. In these attempts at compensation, children acquire a set of behaviors. For example, the sickly child may strive to increase physical prowess by running or lifting weights. These behaviors become part of the style of life, a pattern of behaviors designed to compensate for an inferiority.

Everything we do is shaped and defined by our unique style of life. It determines which aspects of our environment we attend to or ignore and what attitudes we hold. The style of life is learned from social interactions that occur in the early years of life. Adler suggested

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that the style of life is so firmly crystallized by the age of 4 or 5 that it is difficult to change thereafter.

The style of life becomes the guiding framework for all later behaviors. As we noted, its nature depends on social interactions, especially the person's order of birth within the family and the nature of the parent–child relationship. Recall that one condition that can lead to an inferiority complex is neglect. Neglected children may feel inferior in coping with the demands of life and therefore may become distrustful and hostile toward others. As a result, their style of life may involve seeking revenge, resenting others' success, and taking whatever they feel is their due.

The Creative Power of the Self

The ability to create an appropriate style of life. Adler believed that the individual creates the style of life. We create our selves, our personality, our character; these are all terms Adler used interchangeably with style of life. We are not passively shaped by childhood experiences. Those experiences are not as important as our conscious attitude toward them. Adler argued that neither heredity nor environment provides a complete explanation for personality development. Instead, the way we interpret these influences forms the basis for the creative construction of our attitude toward life.

Adler argued for the existence of individual free will that allows each of us to create an appropriate style of life from the abilities and experiences given us by both our genetic endowment and our social environment. Although unclear on specifics, Adler insisted that our style of life is not determined for us; we are free to choose and create it ourselves. Once created, however, the style of life remains constant throughout life

Dominant, Getting, Avoiding, and Socially Useful Styles

Adler described several universal problems and grouped them in three categories:

1. Problems involving our behavior toward others

2. Problems of occupation

3. Problems of love

He proposed four basic styles of life for dealing with these problems:

1. The dominant type

2. The getting type

3. The avoiding type

4. The socially useful type

The first type displays a dominant or ruling attitude with little social awareness. Such a person behaves without regard for others. The more extreme of this type attack others and become sadists, delinquents, or sociopaths. The less virulent become alcoholics, drug addicts, or suicides; they believe they hurt others by attacking themselves.

The getting type (to Adler, the most common human type) expects to receive satisfaction from other people and so becomes dependent on them.

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The avoiding type makes no attempt to face life's problems. By avoiding difficulties, the person avoids any possibility of failure. These three types are not prepared to cope with the problems of everyday life. They are unable to cooperate with other people, and the clash between their style of life and the real world results in abnormal behavior, which is manifested in neuroses and psychoses. They lack what Adler came to call social interest.

The socially useful type cooperates with others and acts in accordance with their needs. Such persons cope with problems within a well-developed framework of social interest.

Adler was generally opposed to rigidly classifying or typing people in this way, stating that he proposed these four styles of life solely for teaching purposes. He cautioned therapists to avoid the mistake of assigning people to mutually exclusive categories.

Social Interest

Adler believed that getting along with others is the first task we encounter in life. Our subsequent level of social adjustment, which is part of our style of life, influences our approach to all of life's problems. He proposed the concept of social interest, which he defined as the individual's innate potential to cooperate with other people to achieve personal and societal goals.

Although we are influenced more strongly by social than biological forces, in Adler's view, the potential for social interest is innate. In that limited sense, then, Adler's approach has a biological element. However, the extent to which our innate potential for social interest is realized depends on our early social experiences.

No one can avoid entirely other people or obligations toward them. From earliest times, people have congregated in families, tribes, and nations. Communities are indispensable to human beings for protection and survival. Thus, it has always been necessary for people to cooperate, to express their social interest. The individual must cooperate with and contribute to society to realize personal and communal goals.

The newborn is in a situation that requires cooperation, initially from the mother or primary caregiver, then from other family members and people at day care or school. Adler noted the importance of the mother as the first person with whom the baby comes in contact. Through her behavior toward the child, the mother can either foster social interest or thwart its development.

The mother must teach the child cooperation, companionship, and courage. Only if children feel kinship with others can they act with courage in attempting to cope with life's demands. Children (and later, adults) who look upon others with suspicion and hostility will approach life with the same attitude. Those who have no feeling of social interest may become neurotics or even criminals. Adler noted that evils ranging from war to racial hatred to public drunkenness stemmed from a lack of community feeling.

It is interesting to note that early in his career, Adler suggested that people were driven by a lust for power and a need to dominate. He proposed this idea at the time he was struggling to establish his own point of view within the Freudian circle. After he broke with Freud and achieved recognition for his own work, he proposed that people are motivated more by social interest than by the needs for power and dominance.

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When Adler was part of Freud's group, he was considered cantankerous and ambitious, quarreling over the priority of his ideas. But in later years, he mellowed and his system also changed, from emphasizing power and dominance as motivating forces to stressing the more benign force of social or community interest.

Birth Order

One of Adler's most enduring contributions is the idea that order of birth is a major social influence in childhood, one from which we create our style of life. Even though siblings have the same parents and live in the same house, they do not have identical social environments. Being older or younger than one's siblings and being exposed to differing parental attitudes create different childhood conditions that help determine personality. Adler liked to amaze lecture audiences and dinner guests by guessing a person's order of birth on the basis of his or her behavior. He wrote about four situations: the first-born child, the second-born child, the youngest child, and the only child.

- The First-Born

Child At least for a while, first-born children are in a unique and enviable situation. Usually the parents are happy at the birth of the first child and devote considerable time and attention to the new baby. First-borns typically receive their parents' instant and undivided attention. As a result, first-borns have a happy, secure existence—until the second-born child appears.

Suddenly, no longer the focus of attention, no longer receiving constant love and care, first-borns are, in a sense, dethroned. The affection first-borns received during their reign must now be shared. They must often submit to the outrage of waiting until after the newborn's needs have been met, and they are admonished to be quiet so as not to disturb the new baby.

No one could expect first-borns to suffer this drastic displacement without putting up a fight. They will try to recapture their former position of power and privilege. The first-born's battle to regain supremacy in the family is lost from the beginning, however. Things will never be the same, no matter how hard the first-born tries.

For a time, first-borns may become stubborn, ill behaved, and destructive and may refuse to eat or go to bed. They are striking out in anger, but the parents will probably strike back, and their weapons are far more powerful. When first-borns are punished for their troublesome behavior, they may interpret the punishment as additional evidence of their fall and may come to hate the second child, who is, after all, the cause of the problem.

Adler believed all first-borns feel the shock of their changed status in the family, but those who have been excessively pampered feel a greater loss. Also, the extent of the loss depends on the first-born's age at the time the rival appears. In general, the older a first-born child is when the second child arrives, the less dethronement the first-born will experience. For example, an 8-year-old will be less upset by the birth of a sibling than will a 2-year-old.

Adler found that first-borns are often oriented toward the past, locked in nostalgia and pessimistic about the future. Having learned the advantages of power at one time, they remain concerned with it throughout life. They can exercise some power over younger siblings, but at the same time they are more subject to the power of their parents because more is expected of them.

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There are advantages to being the first-born child, however. As the children age, the first-born often plays the role of teacher, tutor, leader, and disciplinarian, expected by parents to help care for younger siblings. These experiences often enable the first-born to mature intellectually to a higher degree than the younger children.

Adler believed that first-borns also take an unusual interest in maintaining order and authority. They become good organizers, conscientious and scrupulous about detail, authoritarian and conservative in attitude. Sigmund Freud was a first-born; Adler described him as a typical eldest son. First-borns may grow up to feel insecure and hostile toward others. Adler believed that neurotics, perverts, and criminals were often first-borns.

- The Second-Born Child

Second-born children, the ones who caused such upheaval in the lives of first-borns, are also in a unique situation. They never experience the powerful position once occupied by the first-borns. Even if another child is brought into the family, second borns do not suffer the sense of dethronement felt by the first-borns. Furthermore, by this time the parents have usually changed their child-rearing attitudes and practices. A second baby is not the novelty the first was; parents may be less concerned and anxious about their own behavior and may take a more relaxed approach to the second child.

From the beginning, second-borns have a pacesetter in the older sibling. The second child always has the example of the older child's behavior as a model, a threat, or a source of competition. Adler was a second-born child who had a lifelong competitive relationship with his older brother (whose name was Sigmund). Even when Adler became a famous analyst, he felt overshadowed by his brother.

Competition with the first-born may serve to motivate the second-born, who may strive to catch up to and surpass the older sibling, a goal that spurs language and motor development in the second-born. Not having experienced power, second borns are not as concerned with it. They are more optimistic about the future and are likely to be competitive and ambitious, as Adler was.

Other less beneficial outcomes may arise from the relationship between first borns and second-borns. If, for example, the older sibling excels in sports or scholarship, the second-born may feel that he or she can never surpass the first-born and may give up trying. In this case, competitiveness would not become part of the second born's style of life, and he or she may become an underachiever, performing below his or her abilities in many facets of life.

- The Youngest Child

Youngest or last-born children never face the shock of dethronement by another child and often become the pet of the family, particularly if the siblings are more than a few years older. Driven by the need to surpass older siblings, youngest children often develop at a remarkably fast rate. Last-borns are often high achievers in whatever work they undertake as adults.

The opposite can occur, however, if the youngest children are excessively pampered and come to believe they needn't learn to do anything for themselves. As they grow older, such children may retain the helplessness and dependency of childhood. Unaccustomed to striving and struggling, used to being cared for, these people find it difficult to adjust to adulthood.

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- The Only Child

Only children never lose the position of primacy and power they hold in the family; they remain the focus and center of attention. Spending more time in the company of adults than a child with siblings, only children often mature early and manifest adult behaviors and attitudes.

Only children are likely to experience difficulties when they find that in areas of life outside the home, such as school, they are not the center of attention. Only children have learned neither to share nor to compete. If their abilities do not bring them sufficient recognition and attention, they are likely to feel keenly disappointed.

Criticism of Alfred Adler's Theory of Personality

Adler's individual psychology and his ideas about inferiority complexes and striving for superiority have also faced criticism:

1. Oversimplification of Human Motivation

- **Single Driving Force**: Adler's theory of personality revolves around the notion that the primary motivation for human behavior is the striving for superiority or overcoming inferiority. Critics argue that this singular focus on overcoming inferiority is too simplistic and doesn't account for the complexity of human motives, such as biological needs, emotions, or the desire for relationships.

2. Lack of Empirical Support

- **Difficult to Test**: Many of Adler's concepts, such as the inferiority complex and social interest, are difficult to empirically validate. There is limited scientific research supporting Adler's ideas, and many of his theories rely on clinical observations rather than rigorous experimentation.

3. Minimization of Biological Factors

- Adler emphasized the importance of social factors and downplayed the role of biological influences on personality development. Critics argue that his theory underestimates the influence of genetic and physiological factors, such as temperament, neurobiology, and hormonal influences, on personality.

4. Overemphasis on Early Childhood

- Similar to Freud, Adler placed a strong emphasis on early childhood experiences, particularly sibling relationships and birth order, as determinants of personality. Critics argue that his focus on these early factors overlooks the significance of later life experiences and ongoing personal development.

5. Simplicity of Birth Order Theory

- Adler's theory on the influence of birth order (e.g., first-borns, middle children, youngest children) has been criticized for being overly simplistic and not supported by consistent empirical research. While birth order can influence personality, research has found that its impact is far more nuanced and less deterministic than Adler suggested.

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6. Social Determinism

- Adler’s emphasis on social factors, especially his belief that individuals are shaped by societal pressures and their social context, has been criticized for being overly deterministic. Some argue that he downplayed individual free will and creativity in shaping one’s own life path.

7. Neglect of Unconscious Processes

- While Adler’s theory focuses on conscious motivations and the role of social influences, he largely ignores the unconscious mind, which is central to both Freud’s and Jung’s models. Critics argue that unconscious processes play a critical role in behavior and personality, which Adler's theory doesn’t sufficiently address.

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